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G/AIAG FOR MARGARET JONES
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA IN VENEZUELA: DIALOGUE, OUTREACH,
AND POST PREPAREDNESS

REF: CARACAS 630

CARACAS 00002295 001.2 OF 005

This message is sensitive but unclassified, please treat accordingly.

Summary

¶1. (U) On July 19, the Economic Section held an Avian Influenza Seminar in the Embassy, which drew over 20 participants from the poultry processing sector and the Ministry of Agriculture (MAT). The Seminar provided a forum to better understand the BRV's plans for Avian Influenza as well as to highlight the private sector's concerns. So far, the BRV has drafted a "procedure manual" based on FAO standards (not yet made public) and is looking to reach out to the private poultry producers, who were mostly unaware that the BRV had any preparations at all. Producers were especially concerned about biosecurity and compensation in

the event of an outbreak. Post has set up an AI listserve and is looking to hold DVCs with experts as part of an ongoing outreach strategy. In addition, Post sent the MAT Animal Health Coordinator to the U.S. on a Voluntary Visitor (VolVis) program in April, and held an Embassy AI Emergency Action Subcommittee meeting in May. End Summary.

Video sparks talk about AI plans

¶2. (U) The Econ section coordinated an Avian Influenza Seminar on July 19. Turnout was suprisingly high, and over 20 participants from the poultry industry (including pro-government companies and one Brazilian industry representative) and the Ministry of Agriculture's Animal Health Inspection Service (SASA) attended. Post participation included the Environmental Hub Officer and personnel from the Health Unit, American Citizen Services (ACS), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS).

¶3. (U) The Seminar began with an edited version of the video "Killer Flu" (produced by State), which highlighted some human health aspects of AI, showed how animal health authorities in Vietnam dealt with an outbreak, and touched on cultural barriers to eradication of the disease. The participants used it as a platform to begin a lively discussion on Avian Influenza in Venezuela. Aimara Flores, SASA's AI coordinator, began by acknowledging that her organization was aware of the problem, and that the BRV had already taken steps to ban Colombian poultry imports based on an outbreak of low-path AI (Note: The 2005 poultry ban lifted

CARACAS 00002295 002.2 OF 005

on July 31. End Note) She also noted that some of the cultural preferences of Vietnam (such as eating raw duck blood soup) make that country more prone to the disease. Noting that the video was somewhat alarmist, Flores said that Venezuela was at low risk for H5N1 Avian Flu, and that the WHO has not confirmed human-to-human transmission.

BRV Avian Flu Plan

¶4. (U) Flores announced that the BRV had already formed an AI commission (with joint participation from the government and the private sector), which has drafted a "procedure manual" based on an FAO AI plan. She said the manual would be out soon, but that the Ministry of Agriculture (MAT) had yet to approve SASA's budget for the project. Later in the discussion, she criticized that the BRV's funding was being directed solely at the Ministry of Health (MSDS), and that it should be going to MAT, as AI is an animal health problem before it's a human health issue.

¶5. (U) Flores said that SASA has held over 6 seminars this year alone, and ran a 40-person simulation involving government agencies, including Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Labor and Defense, as well as the customs and tax agency (SENIAT), the National Hygiene Institute and the National Institute for Agricultural Research (INIA). Flores also announced another simulation in September, which will include the private sector. SASA representatives noted that they would like to unify diagnostic criteria to make it routine and consecutive. The invitee from the Ministry of Health did not attend the seminar, but SASA representatives said that the MSDS has a supply of Tamiflu (unknown amount), but has had problems obtaining protective gear.

¶6. (U) A representative from Post's ACS section asked SASA how the BRV planned to inform the public about the risks of Avian Flu. SASA responded that they are preparing public campaigns that center around food hygiene and general best practices (once the funding comes through). The Brazilian

poultry sector representative highlighted that actual deaths from H5N1 Avian Flu were very few, and that waging an alarmist public campaign would do more harm than good. The Ministry of Health has opened a hotline to report suspicious cases, though mass advertising is also pending budget approval.

Concerns from the poultry industry

¶7. (U) According to participants, per capita chicken

CARACAS 00002295 003.2 OF 005

production is higher in Venezuela than in some of the world's largest exporters, such as neighboring Brazil. A Venezuelan poultry producer expressed concern about the "aves de traspatio" (free-range birds, i.e. not in coops), and how they often come in contact with commercial poultry despite biosecurity of facilities. He said this was the Achilles heel in production (despite biosecurity efforts), and AI could easily propagate via these birds. SASA did not comment directly, other than to acknowledge that this was indeed a weakness.

¶8. (U) Another poultry producer asked about SASA's plans for monitoring and testing (presumably for commercial fowl). SASA answered that they have three migratory bird testing points, and hope to increase this with more funding (they did not mention testing of commercial poultry). They plan on testing over 54,000 birds nationwide, focusing on high-risk areas, to determine if they are free of AI.

¶9. (U) Many participants asked about compensation in the event of an AI outbreak and SASA-mandated extermination of commercial poultry. One poultry farmer said that unless there was government compensation, he could theoretically bury the dead chickens and sell the live ones, and no one would know. Other participants discussed that compensation was needed, otherwise there would be an economic incentive to hide outbreaks. Flores assured the producers that compensation was part of the BRV "procedure manual" and that it would be part of the AI policy.

Post Outreach

¶10. (U) During the seminar, post's APHIS representative told the group about upcoming diagnostics training in Colombia and the existence of two authorized molecular diagnostics testing labs for South America, explaining that the labs will require a trained individual to package the samples. Econoff asked for feedback regarding future events, and participants expressed interest in a DVC with avian flu experts and/or representatives from the U.S. poultry industry. All participants responded positively to the idea of an AI listserve for future communications. The listserve was created on Jul 26, and Econoff has been sending relevant information, such as Spanish-language AI links and articles.

AI VolVis Program

¶11. (U) In April, the Econ Section nominated Gloria Hernandez, Animal Health Coordinator for SASA, to participate

CARACAS 00002295 004.2 OF 005

in a regional Avian Influenza VolVis Program. (Note: Aimara Flores was also set to participate, but for health reasons was not able to go. End Note). Funding for the airfare was provided by FAS. Hernandez traveled to Washington DC, Atlanta, and Miami and met with a series of USG agencies

(including CDC, DHS, and DOD) along with a group of animal and human health officials from South America. The visitor program received positive reviews from all participants, and provided a forum to share experiences and learn about U.S. preparedness for an Avian Flu outbreak. As of June, Hernandez changed positions within SASA and was named Director of Zoosanitary Control.

Post AI Task Force

¶12. (SBU) On May 25, Post's AI Emergency Action Subcommittee convened. The group is comprised of the Deputy Chief of Mission, Economic Counselor, the Defense Attache, the Management Counselor, Post's Avian Flu Coordinator (EconOff), and personnel from the Health Unit, the Regional Security Office (RSO), ACS, and APHIS. The group discussed pending items from preparedness checklist. Regarding linkage with local government health officials, Post's physician said he had no formal contacts, but the APHIS representative said that he has regular dialogue SASA and the Pan-American Health Organization. RSO has discussed facilities access plans, and is in the process of drafting a plan, but requested any available guidance. The Health Unit has pre-ordered 200 regular flu shots and has over 3,000 Tamiflu doses, as well as protective equipment.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The Avian Influenza Seminar was a success. It opened an animated discussion and opened a forum for dialogue between the private sector and the government -- a task often difficult to accomplish with the BRV. One poultry producer told Econoff separately that he found the event very useful, as he thought the BRV had no plan whatsoever on AI. The success of the event hints at the lack of prior linkage between the two groups. The next step is that contacts made between participants provide an opportunity to bridge that gap. Though an H5N1 AI outbreak seems highly unlikely at the present time, both the Embassy and the BRV are making preparations. The BRV is publicly silent on their AI plan, and has some preparedness implementation issues (mostly budgetary), but they are aware of the problem. Post received a draft SASA avian influenza contingency plan which we are reviewing; however, it does not yet have BRV interagency

CARACAS 00002295 005.2 OF 005

approval. The Econ Section will continue to reach out the AI "community" in order to facilitate dialogue and carry on with contingency preparations for an H5N1 outbreak in Venezuela.
End Comment.
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